

## *Conference Reports*

### **AMSS Thirty-second Annual Conference**

*Bloomington, IN – September 26-28, 2003*

The Thirty-second Annual AMSS Conference, cosponsored this year by Indiana University's Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies program and the department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, analyzed "East Meets West: Understanding the Muslim Presence in Europe and North America." Katherine Bullock (program committee chair, University of Toronto), Nazif Shahrani (professor of anthropology, director of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies program, Indiana University), Patrick O'Meara (dean, International Programs, Indiana University), and Louay Safi (president, AMSS) welcomed attendees and made introductory remarks.

Since the passing of Edward Said coincided with the beginning of the conference, in his welcoming remarks Shahrani referred to this great scholar's lasting legacy. In fact, many panelists during the course of the conference talked about the importance of Said's research to their own work.

Regular AMSS attendees such as myself would tell you that this conference was a tightly organized orchestra of excellent sessions, one after the other. The number of sessions was smaller than usual, and there were fewer parallel sessions, probably because far more academic rigor had been exercised in selection of papers than had been the case in previous conferences.

A special delight on the first day was the lunch and *jumu`ah* prayer at the Bloomington Islamic Center, catered and served by Bloomington Muslim community volunteers. After these events, the conference began in earnest. The opening panel, "A Political Philosophical Perspective on Islam and Democracy," featured M. A. Muqtedar Khan (Adrian College), who addressed the theoretical aspects of this debate, and Nazia Khandwalla (University of Texas), who looked at the debate in an empirical study of slum-dwelling women in Karachi.

The second session focused on North American Muslim women's narrations of identity. Shabana Mir (Indiana University) spoke on American Muslim undergraduate women and their encounters with alcohol on college campuses, based on a study at two East Coast universities. Aneesah Nadir (Arizona State University) spoke about her research study with young Muslim American women. Bridget Blomfield (Claremont Graduate University) presented her ethnographic study done at a Shi`ah mosque that focused on the *azah* (the mourning ritual during Muharram) and its implications for female participants.

In the third panel, Zareena Grewal's film "By the Dawn's Early Light: Abdul-Rauf's [Chris Jackson] Journey to Islam," was shown. The film discussed the conversion and career of Chris Jackson of the NBA, as well as his tribulations after he refused to salute the American flag. The film generated pathos as well as stirred controversial issues, especially regarding different positioning strategies by immigrant and indigenous (especially black) Muslims.

The new AMSS Board of Directors (2003-05) was introduced that evening at the AMSS business meeting: Muqtedar Khan (president), Rafik Beekun (vice president), Kamran Bokhari (secretary), and Qamar-ul Huda (treasurer). The two members-at-large are Jasmin Zine and Maliha Chishti, the first women to be elected to the AMSS Board.

On Saturday, the first session was about Muslim intellectuals. Karim H. Karim (Carleton University) analyzed Muslim scholars and their audiences in the diaspora. Peter Mandaville (George Mason University) spoke on the transnational impact of Muslim intellectuals in the West and whether they were exporting progressive Islam. Louay Safi (AMSS) spoke about Muslim intellectuals' engagement with modernity. In a parallel session, Yesim Kaptan (Indiana University) presented a case study of a religious festival among liberal Turks in the United States, and

Zahra Jamal (Harvard University) presented “Performing Pluralism: Volunteerism among Muslims in Houston, Texas.”

The next panel, “Islamic Organizations and Movements,” featured Frank Peter (Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, Leiden, The Netherlands), who spoke on the state and representation of Islam in France; Anas Malik (Xavier University), who discussed “Why Being a Fundamentalist Is a Persistent Mobilization Strategy”; and Alexandre Caeiro (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, France), who dealt with Islamic normativity in the West via the European Council for Fatwa and Research. A lively question-and-answer session followed.

The parallel session featured Robert Crane’s (Center for Understanding Islam) “Common Vision in the Faith of the Founding,” Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad’s (Minaret of Freedom Institute) “Islamic Religion and American Culture,” and Ho Wai Yip (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), who portrayed a life history account of a Southeast Asian Muslim family diaspora. Hamada Hamid (New York University) spoke on medical ethics discourses in Islam in the West.

Later that afternoon, a panel focused on “Islamic Politics: Mapping New Visions.” Ghulam Haniff presented “Muslim Communities in the West,” Enamul Choudhury (University of Cincinnati) presented “The Absence of ‘Future:’ Muslim Imagination and Its Engagement with the World,” and Saeed A. Khan (Institute of Social Policy and Understanding) spoke on a subject often neglected by Muslim academics: genetically modified foods as a form of neocolonialism. In a parallel panel, the following participants focused on “Islam in a Multifaith Society”: Jeremy Henzell-Thomas (The Book Foundation, UK), Tarek Mitri (World Council of Churches, Switzerland), Judith Jensen (Oregon Institute of Technology), and Ataul Huq Pramanik (International Islamic University of Malaysia).

In the next session, Dilnawaz Siddiqui (Clarion University) analyzed “Media and Policy Generation.” Wendy O’Shea-Meddour’s paper, presented by Katherine Bullock, subjected V. S. Naipaul’s pathological imagery of Muslims to the reader’s gaze. Mucahit Bilici (University of Michigan) spoke on “Representations of Islam in America after 9/11,” using the theme of jihad in several contexts. Fathi Malkawi (IIIT) presented “Unity and Integration of Knowledge: Various Manifestations and Driving Forces.”

In the parallel session, Ali H. Zaidi (York University) presented “Dialogues on Modernity: Muslim Reconstructions of Knowledge and Western Social Theory as External and Immanent Critiques.” Athar Murtuza (Seton Hall University) spoke about the contemporary discourse of *riba*’ among Muslims, and Kamran Bokhari (Howard University) analyzed Islamist political thought and how it incorporates medieval (eastern) Islamic political philosophy into modern western democratic discourse.

At the annual banquet that evening, Ali Mazrui (director, Institute of Global Cultural Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton) delivered the keynote address: “A Marriage of Two Civilizations: The Balance between Western Norms and Muslim Values.” He discussed points of convergence and divergence in cultural and military terms. The AMSS Third Annual Best Graduate Paper Award ceremony was the banquet’s second highlight. The awards were introduced to promote scholarship on Islam and Muslim societies. Ho Wai Yip received the “Best Graduate Paper” award, Zahra Jamal was awarded the second prize, and Shabana Mir received the third prize.

My favorite session was the last: “Integrating Islam within Anti-racist and Social Justice Discourses and Movements.” Jasmin Zine (University of Toronto) spoke about anti-racist feminism from a faith-based perspective based on her data from an ethnographic study of an Islamic school. Maliha Chishti (University of Toronto) delivered a moving paper entitled “The Enemy in Waiting: Reflections as a Muslim Entangled in the West,” on the personally traumatic post-9/11 experiences of Muslims as a community. Amina Hedayat Khalil’s son presented her paper, “The Social Location of the American Muslim Community from an Intersections Framework,” and Zareena Grewal (University of Michigan) discussed “Marriage in Color: Race, Religious Authority and Spouse Selection in Four Muslim Communities in Michigan.”

As a regular AMSS attendee, I heard others regretting that the number of attendees was so small. However, the level of rigor exhibited by the conference went a long way toward shaping AMSS as an academic organization attractive to social science academics. Hopefully, this rigor will continue and AMSS' independence and integrity will be preserved and raised to a higher level. Beyond the sessions, all of which were marked by enlightening presentations and incisive debate, many participants, such as myself, return to AMSS conferences for the collegial climate that, at the same time, is not lacking in critical exchange and lively disagreement.

The beginning of this conference coincided with a sorrowful event that touched Muslims, Arabs, non-Muslims, and lovers of justice and freedom all over the world: the death of Edward Said. I felt a poignant sense of loss, as if a father figure had left us. Said was not a Muslim, but he advocated for Muslims right along with many other contemporary Muslim intellectuals. In the post-9/11 world, we mourn this loss and look among ourselves, hoping that public intellectuals who speak the truth in spite of empire will not be completely absent.

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